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## LETTER.....

### Gender balance and sex equality

Without intervention, a small preponderance of female over male infants will be born, and female children will have a slightly higher chance of living to maturity. Thereafter, the female population will decline comparatively sharply in consequence of death in childbirth. Historical evidence indicates that throughout the recorded history of Britain, there was a relative scarcity of women, and men dominated social structures. This situation was only reversed in the early decades of the 20th century, a time when three generations of young men had gone, in succession, to be soldiers. These wars were largely fought abroad, and too few returned to provide husbands for all the available women.

It is no coincidence that this era also saw the real beginning of equality for women. Circumstances dictated that women undertake roles previously considered male, and events proved their ability to do so. The surplus women continued in working careers, perforce,

providing role models for those who came after. All the protests of the suffragettes were less effective than this brutal gender imbalance.

Dickens's assertion that the present scarcity of girls in India, due to sex selection before and after birth, will lead to a future increased social value for daughters, may be true.<sup>1</sup> This will in no way reverse the force of male dominance, however, since to have value as a wife and a mother is not necessarily to have value as a person. On the contrary, a shortage of wives and mothers will reduce opportunities for these future women to be anything else. Their chance of escaping the present lot of their mothers will be significantly less.

In the developed world, the birth rate is falling below replacement levels. A first male child is still preferred and a family of less than two children cannot be balanced. To this day, equality of the sexes has not been fully achieved. Dickens complains that prohibition of sex selection is ineffective, using demo-

graphic data from India to prove his point. Most countries prohibit murder, which would also appear to be ineffective. None the less, such law is regarded as a worthwhile statement of the limits of morally acceptable behaviour. He also says that prohibition of sex selection is unjust and oppressive, when used in a society such as Canada, where a survey suggests that sex preference for second born children is chiefly to have one child of each sex. Prohibiting sex selection even in these circumstances is a statement of what a society believes is a morally acceptable attitude towards parenthood, and as such, should not be regarded as unjust or oppressive.

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